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Introduction

It is not for the truth that men seek, but for that which is pleasant to believe. Poor, ill-clad, shivering truth stands pitiful by the way; for men have ever passed her by in search of that which they desire.¹

—*J. Horace Round*

Austere and fortress-like, the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Riyadh was built to inhabit its central Arabian surroundings. Wrapped around the massive front gate of the Danish-designed building is a Quranic verse, 49:13: “O people, we have created you male and female,” the inscription begins, ascending toward the right end of the lintel in flowing, golden script. Bearing left above the tall, recessed doorway, the verse’s key phrase unfolds across the observer’s field of vision: “and made you peoples and tribes.” Descending to completion down the left side of the door frame, the inscription concludes: “so that you may come to know one another. Verily, the most noble among you is the most God-fearing.”

Invoked in this context, verse 49:13 is a statement of bureaucratic purpose, reminding visitors that the Foreign Ministry’s mission “to contribute to the formation of an international order based on justice and principles of common humanity” rests upon the Saudi state’s pious foundations.² Immutable associations aside, it is to the peoples or nations of the world, not to its tribes, that the Foreign Ministry addresses itself. For an alternative reading of this verse, one might look to its presentation as a more figurative framing device for the thousands of genealogical trees that have been conceived and created by Saudis over the past half-century. Splashed across the top border of that quintessential Saudi art form is, quite often, verse 49:13. “O people, we have created you male and female, and made you peoples and tribes, so that you may come to know one another. Verily, the most noble among you is the most God-fearing.” Positioned above a family tree, the verse takes on a radically new meaning. Its call for the mutual acquaintance of nations is muted, as is its apparent privileging of Muslim communion over the fractured and par-



Figure 0.1. Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, front entrance. Courtesy of Henning Larsen Architects.

ticularist identities into which humanity has been arrayed. In this colorful and allusive statement of modern Saudi identity, the nations of the world, as its God-fearing people, recede into the background, and the Quran’s indirect endorsement of tribal belonging becomes the central fact of the verse and its invocation.

This book intends to explain why tribal genealogies matter in modern Saudi Arabia. It addresses a specific question, one that connects intimately with verse 49:13 and the multiple contexts in which it is embedded in the kingdom: why, in a country so overwhelmingly saturated with public religiosity—its symbols, its laws, its functionaries—is this verse of scripture understood by so many Saudis as a license to assert their particularist tribal identities, while its ostensibly equalizing final clause is dismissed as an afterthought? What explains the compulsion to affirm tribal belonging in modern Saudi Arabia?

Despite the erosion of kinship ties resulting from almost three centuries of religious conditioning, and despite the unprecedented material transformation of Saudi society in the oil age, genealogy remains a central facet of modern Saudi identity.³ A rising tide of interest in genealogies has appeared in the kingdom over the past half-century, embodied in the thousands of largely self-published books, articles, and family trees created by Saudis for the purposes of affirming their families’ tribal lineages. At the heart of the kingdom’s modern genealogical culture is the compulsion many Saudis feel to assert a tribal descent, that is, to prove their lineal attachment to a historically recog-

nizable Arabian tribe, and so establish their ancient roots in the Arabian Peninsula. At the social level, this compulsion reflects a transition from the predominantly oral culture of premodern Arabia to the new textually oriented, bureaucratically influenced society of the modern kingdom, where the capacity to identify or produce texts that credibly affirm one's tribal belonging has become an important marker of authenticity. At the political level, this compulsion is the outcome of a strategy of the Saudi state, which has sought to condition both its bedouin- and sedentary-origin populations toward a locally resonant and materially useful notion of national belonging.

For much of the period under investigation, which commences with the emergence of Wahhabism in the middle of the eighteenth century and concludes near the present day, the documenting of genealogies in central Arabia was a limited practice, confined to the recording of the lineages of the rulers and prominent families of the region's towns and nomadic tribes. It was only with the settling of Arabia's nomadic populations after the Second World War and the assimilation of both bedouin- and sedentary-origin Saudis into a new national enterprise that the documenting of genealogies emerged as a matter of intense social and political interest. Though central to the social and political life of the people of premodern Arabia, genealogies remained by and large unarticulated until the modern age, when they could no longer be taken for granted.

Few societies have undergone as rapid a material transformation as Saudi Arabia in the twentieth century. When the first Saudi state was founded in 1744, savory lizards and desert truffles were the known extent of Arabia's underground bounties. After Ottoman forces defeated the Saudis in 1818 and commenced their brief occupation of central Arabia, it was the scarcity of food and water, among other logistical constraints, that compelled them to beat a rapid retreat and leave the far-flung region to its own devices.⁴ When American engineers were enlisted by the founder of the third and current Saudi state, 'Abd al-'Azīz Ibn Sa'ūd, to drill for fresh water reservoirs in the early 1930s, their attentions were drawn to the dark and viscous substance that would change the course of history.⁵ The discovery of commercial quantities of oil in 1938 initiated a movement of populations and capital into and around the kingdom whose rapidity, particularly after the 1960s, has few precedents in history. This book explores an unexamined consequence of that transformation, namely, how and why a predominantly oral reservoir of social and cultural knowledge, Arabian genealogies, was transferred into print. With the emergence of the text as the authoritative pivot around which new Arabian identities were to be formed, novel categories of problems presented themselves to Saudis. In place of fuzzy genealogical conceptions of old that linked a person's extended family to an ancient or mythic tribal ancestor, lacunae in the genealogical record could now be imagined, and doubts about

the origins of oneself or one's neighbors arose. These new categories of problems, at once historiographical and personal, commenced a scramble to assert belonging within the often disorienting spaces of the modern kingdom.

This book is primarily a study of the lineage claims of Saudis of sedentary origin, or Saudis whose ancestors originated in one or another of Arabia's scattered farming towns and villages. Such towns include the modern Saudi capital of Riyadh, which after the eighteenth century became a sizable population center, but also tiny and isolated hamlets where small clusters of date palms sustained no more than a few families. Though often generations removed from a direct connection to their root clans of origin, these sedentary agriculturalists believed themselves to descend from historically recognized Arabian tribes, most of which were nomadic, though a few, such as Banī Zayd and Banī Tamīm, were largely sedentary. The manner by which the modern, urban descendants of these peasant farmers conceive of their genealogical relations across space and time is one of the central concerns of this book. Unlike many studies of tribes and tribal identity,⁶ this book is less concerned with what happens to nomadic groups when they come into contact with centralized states, as with what becomes of the sedentary social imagination when nomadic groups are brought into sedentary life. While I devote some attention to Saudi bedouin genealogies and questions of bedouin tribal identity, I do so mostly for the purposes of clarifying the sociological and historical backdrop against which sedentary genealogical claims are made. In tracking the bedouin-sedentary binary through the ebb and flow of modern Saudi history, I hope to demonstrate the dynamism and potency of kinship attitudes in the social and political imagination of the modern kingdom and, by extension, that of other societies experiencing rapid transformation.

What is the meaning of the tribe to which Saudis claim belonging? The concept of tribe, anthropologists have shown, can refer to peoples exhibiting a variety of economic activities, ethnic origins, or forms of sociopolitical organization.⁷ Rather than fixed and unchanging entities, as we might be conditioned to consider them, premodern Arabian tribes are best thought of as processes of social formation and dissolution contingent on ecological and political circumstance. This changeability is apparent, for example, in the changing names of Arabia's tribal confederations, branches, and families over the centuries, most of which can be found blending into and out of oral and documented memory. Through the obscuring and illuminating of these names, one might trace an ecological, political, and social history of the Arabian Peninsula.⁸

Counterposed against this notion of changeability is a more durable construct that underpins the tribal system in its diverse guises: the ideology of patrilineal descent. The idea that the tribe achieves its definition through the principle of blood descent in an apical ancestor's paternal line has proven

central to the conceptualizing of tribal systems by local actors and Western scholars alike. Yet if patrilineage is often the language in which social and political relationships are expressed, it does not, in and of itself, determine how these relationships are formed.⁹ To explain the relevance of patrilineage to the modern Saudi genealogical story, and why tribal identity is so central to modern Saudi identity, I treat the ideology of patrilineal descent as one among a broad range of social, religious, and political discourses, each informed by a distinctively central Arabian material and historical context.

In modern Saudi Arabia, the steady expansion of the state into the traditional domains of the tribe, the provisioning of economic goods and physical security, has largely eliminated the tribal system's *raison d'être*. Yet the idea of the tribe and tribal belonging has persisted strongly in the Saudi imagination, beyond what might be justified by a personal desire to reattach oneself to one's newly unfamiliar homeland, or a historiographical concern with diminishing the span of the *inqitā'*, or rupture, that separates Arabia's oral cultural past from its documented present.¹⁰ The role of the Saudi state must be accounted for in the emergence of the kingdom's genealogical culture. Through its practices, the state has breathed new life into tribal identity, rendering it one of the only meaningful forms of civic association permissible in the kingdom. It is ultimately this state's tacit glorification of the tribe that has compelled many in the kingdom to rediscover or invent patrilineal affiliations to prominent Arabian tribes through which they can authenticate their position in modern Saudi society. For the main subjects of this book, Saudis of sedentary origin whose tribal lineages are undesirable, uncertain, or suspect, the tribe is quite simply a normative aspiration, one that is as much a product of the biopolitics of the modern Saudi state as it is of the central Arabian social imagination.

Linking these threads together, the social and the political, is the individual whose life and work lie at the center of this study, the central Arabian (Najdi) genealogist and historian Ḥamad al-Jāsir (d. 2000). More than any other single person, al-Jāsir was responsible for ushering in the kingdom's modern genealogical culture, for defining its objectives and normalizing its methods. Born in 1909 in a central Arabian mud-brick village, this scholar rose to prominence during his lifetime as the primary authority on the history and heritage of central Arabia. When late in life al-Jāsir turned to the systematic compiling of the lineages of the kingdom's inhabitants, he was forced to confront the sparsely documented record of central Arabia's past, and the predominant position of Arabia's oral tradition in the preservation and transmission of knowledge about this past.

In his influential study of modern identity formation, Benedict Anderson singles out three dimensions of the cultural life of the premodern world whose decline enabled the emergence of modern nationalism in Europe and

other regions.¹¹ Among these was the dethroning of Latin as the unifying language of sacred and mundane authority, and its replacement by the Latin vernaculars that today comprise the national languages of many European states. In the modern Middle East, however, a countervailing process unfolded. In the aftermath of the European colonial project, the borrowed Latin and Germanic vernaculars of colonial administration ceded much of their terrain to Arabic, the sacred language of the Arabs, which was enshrined as the new language of Arab nationhood, albeit in modified form. In Saudi Arabia, which witnessed no such direct colonial handoff, the fusion of sacred and mundane languages was even more pronounced, and testified to the tight grip of Wahhabi religiosity on the Saudi political imagination. Public culture in Saudi Arabia, the culture of newspapers and books pioneered by Ḥamad al-Jāsir, was thus from the onset cast in a religious mold, its norms delimited by the constrictive priorities of the religious establishment and its royal backers.

When, in the 1950s, Ḥamad al-Jāsir staked his claim within this emergent public culture, he aimed to unsettle this fusion of the sacred and the mundane. Al-Jāsir's efforts to widen the boundaries of permissible knowledge and political engagement in central Arabia saw him condemned to death by the Wahhabi religious establishment and ostracized by the Saudi regime, events that compelled him to reorient his life toward the study of Arabian history and heritage. Of the many subjects al-Jāsir investigated, genealogy proved the most compelling to his readers, and the most fraught with controversy. Opening this unguarded door, the scholar was met with a rush of cultural matter unlike any he had encountered before. This was the force of Arabia's oral genealogical inheritance, which, with all its fluidity, contingency, and ultimate uncertainty, al-Jāsir sought to codify and fashion into documented "facts."

SAUDI HISTORY BETWEEN THE ORAL AND THE TEXTUAL

Investigating the oral cultural backdrop of central Arabian history, a primary concern of this book, is crucial for any understanding of modern Saudi Arabia.¹² While orality is without a doubt a contested analytical category, its utility for understanding the development of the modern genealogical culture of Saudi Arabia, and the kingdom's history in general, must not be understated or casually dismissed.¹³ Several points combine to favor this analytical paradigm, among them the historical preponderance of nomadic populations in the territories that comprise modern Saudi Arabia;¹⁴ the sparsely documented history of these territories, in particular central Arabia; and lastly and most significantly, the dominance in the modern kingdom of central Arabia, the region where nomadism was most widespread and where

bedouin culture was most influential. Central Arabia's absence from the broad sweep of Islamic history is widely recognized.¹⁵ Its marginal historiographical position would be less significant, however, if the region had not emerged as the center of power and authority in the modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a country that is today the only Arab member of the G20 group of wealthy nations, and is perhaps the single most influential state in the modern Middle East. Under this new dispensation, the once peripheral hinterland became the arbiter of culture and national identity, and Ḥamad al-Jāsir's position as its lexicographer and genealogist was crucial for giving voice to this transformation.

In treating the life and work of Ḥamad al-Jāsir as a connecting node between two distinct notions of genealogy, this study casts light as well on the politicization of the Arabian oral tradition. To understand what is meant by the Arabian oral tradition, I will briefly review the concept of orality and the sharp criticism it has sustained as a method of analysis. The notion of orality as a distinctive epistemology was developed by a diverse set of scholars with the goal of reconsidering the privileged position of texts in the interpretation of historical and social phenomena across a range of time periods and continents. Scholars who worked with the oral-textual binary elevated the concept of oral transmission as a privileged unit of analysis, focusing their attention on societies in which literacy was restricted to specific privileged groups (e.g., priestly classes, religious scholars) and oral forms of knowledge predominated. Textual literacy, the dominant mode of communication in the modern Western world, was measured by these scholars as the end state toward which non-Western oral cultures were transitioning.¹⁶

For Jack Goody, one of the first to look systematically at the influence of oral traditions in non-Western societies, the archetypal model of this end state was ancient Greece, where literacy was relatively widespread. Goody treated literacy as a causal mechanism that more than any other factor influenced the development of Greek civilization. The oral-textual binary was thus wedded from its inception to a notion of ancient Greek preeminence, which served in turn as a model against which to measure contemporary non-Western societies, whose failure to measure up was thus a feature built into the schema. For scholars of a more psychological bent, such as Walter Ong, orality and literacy were categories of consciousness whose parameters were fixed deterministically by the presence or absence of technologies of writing and textual reproduction in a given society. Though preoccupied chiefly with establishing new definitions of modernity, most scholars of orality and textuality gave little consideration to the role of the modern state in circumscribing oral culture or promoting particular forms of literacy. In the Saudi case, for example, the state and its validators within the Wahhabi religious establishment promoted religious literacy as the domi-

nant form of engagement with modernity, leaving oral cultural forms subordinated and devalued.

As Brinkley Messick and others have demonstrated, oral transmission was an essential component of the production of literate knowledge in traditional Arabian societies.¹⁷ In Yemen and Oman, as elsewhere, “recitational reproduction” was intrinsic to religious learning; Islamic knowledge was traditionally rooted in the oral transmission of texts, not the mere copying of manuscripts from one scribe to the next. Messick’s approach, however, privileges a form of orality that was anchored in a textual referent, the Quran, and one whose purchase was limited to sedentary communities. The tradition of genealogical documentation investigated here is a far more slippery and subjective endeavor than the legal tradition Messick addresses, and thus opens the way for different considerations of the role of oral narrative and testimonial within it. As a sedentary figure narrating a history of sedentary lineages that for the most part excluded the bedouin, Ḥamad al-Jāsir fit into the cultural mold prepared by the dominant religious dispensation of his locale, Wahhabism. Yet despite his best efforts to transcend its localized constraints and imprecisions, the scholar remained beholden to an oral epistemology that had far less to do with Wahhabism than with the nomadic or otherwise nonliterate backdrop to Arabian settled life. The oral culture in which central Arabian genealogical consciousness was embedded was, at its nonliterate or nomadic source, at most only nominally attached to a textual-Islamic referent.

From the perspective of central Arabia’s religious and political authorities, the oral culture at issue here was a dimension of the irredeemably syncretic and superstitious bedouin mode of thought, which would have to be disciplined by the delimiting authority of scripture if the sedentary project of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb was to succeed. This evolutionary reconditioning was thus imposed from within the central Arabian locale by central Arabia’s own political and religious actors, and was not the solution to a problem that emerged from the application of Western-modeled yardsticks.¹⁸ Genealogical consciousness survived this reconditioning, this book argues, and was drawn into settled life and transmuted by a confluence of social and political forces in the modern age. Following closely the thread of Arabian oral genealogical culture as it is absorbed into the textual life of the modern kingdom, I maintain, opens up new avenues for considering the sociology of Arabian societies, and allows us new insights into the interplay among a range of forces, sedentary and nomadic, religious and secularizing, institutional and personal.

I approach the influence of the oral cultural backdrop on modern Saudi history from two vantage points, one diachronic, the other synchronic. One of the primary concerns of this study is to examine changes in the nature of

Arabian genealogical authority over time. I mark the process by which the ability to produce authoritative statements about Arabian genealogies moved from the localized purview of town and tribal elders to the publishing and distribution networks of scholars such as Ḥamad al-Jāsir, who, as central Arabia's first newsman, was an important figure in the development of the kingdom's public culture. Al-Jāsir, who moved throughout his life in and out of the political orbit of the state—though never far from its patronage networks—was a transitional figure in the kingdom's modern genealogical culture. Although he was treated by many ordinary Saudis as an oracle who possessed arcane knowledge about their most intimate anxieties—their marital futures, their belonging within the nation—his personal charisma was ultimately insufficient to shield his genealogical project from the interested gaze of the state. Studying genealogical documentation as a historical phenomenon unfolding over time, it follows, allows us to move outside of the explicit truth claims of a particular set of genealogical texts such as those produced by al-Jāsir, and brings into focus the influence of an increasingly powerful centralizing state and the ideology of kinship it promoted. Studying Arabian genealogies in this way also allows us to track other unexamined dimensions of Arabian social and political life. A good example is the emergence of non-tribals onto the pages of Saudi history.

Non-tribals, Saudis whose lineages were historically believed suspect, are all but absent from the pages of premodern Saudi chronicles, yet are among the chief protagonists in the kingdom's modern genealogical culture. The intermingling of tribal and non-tribal populations in the modern kingdom as potentially equal citizens induced a reaction by Saudis of tribal origin to reassert the caste-like divisions that had existed historically in Arabian society. The denial of genealogical pedigree to central Arabia's non-tribal populations opened up social fissures that the scholar Ḥamad al-Jāsir took as his object to remedy. The effort by lineage-seeking, sedentary-origin Saudis to have their tribal roots affirmed in al-Jāsir's genealogical volumes is a characteristic development of the kingdom's modern genealogical culture, and investigating this effort forms an important part of this book.

THE ART OF SOCIAL CLIMBING: FROM SPANISH ANDALUSIA TO ARABIA

To consider the material backdrop against which the pageantry of modern Saudi lineages has unfolded, we might look to a time and place quite remote from modern Arabia. Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Andalusian city of Seville was gripped by its own genealogical obsession, one that in important respects parallels our story. There, as in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the exogenous inpouring of a new source of wealth—gold from

the New World—transformed the social hierarchies of the city. The ranks of the patrician nobility, comprised mostly of Christians of recognizably pure lineages, became strained by an influx of newly wealthy merchants, many of Jewish and Muslim descent. These upwardly mobile merchants began seeking aristocratic title, the acquisition of which demanded the demonstration of pure bloodlines. As increasing numbers of merchants bought their way into the Sevillian nobility by fabricating their genealogies to obscure Jewish or Muslim connections, they were confronted by the *linajudos*, conservative genealogists who worked to expose their true origins. The *linajudos* represented the sharp end of the spear of the old Sevillian order, which objected to the social transformations brought on by the new transatlantic economy, and so worked to reverse them, often by devious means. The key element of their strategy was their obsession with the post-*Reconquista* social and ecclesiastical doctrine of *limpieza de sangre*, purity of blood, a standard that *converso* title seekers were shown to never quite attain.¹⁹

The story recounted in this book, though transposed to a massively divergent historical and political context, follows a similar group of social climbers and strivers. It is a story of how a once undifferentiated and socially unambitious peasantry came to covet lineal distinctiveness in a newly urban and literate context. The subjects of this study are by and large government clerks and middle managers, teachers and engineers, small and large businessmen, and newspaper and journal readers—newly literate strivers. These men—and they are almost always men—were born in villages that had yet to be fitted with electricity or running water. In their youth they had migrated, alone or with their families, to the kingdom's population centers where, for reasons to be discussed, a public discourse of tribal nobility and lineal prestige was taking root. With documentary evidence in hand, the strivers of the new Saudi economy sought to acquire a titular stake in that elusive status group, Saudis of pure (*aşil*) tribal origin. Their well-intentioned machinations and connivances will preoccupy us substantially in the pages that follow.

Well into the twentieth century, in places such as Yemen, Oman, and Morocco, the cultivation of elaborate genealogies remained a practice confined to the traditional religious or political elite. Martha Mundy, in her ethnographic study of a northern Yemeni village, found that the genealogical concerns of sedentary Yemeni agriculturalists were largely unambitious. Interest in tribal lineage amounted to a localized reverence for the land and “honourable occupations” of known ancestors, without any particular fixation on mythic antecedents.²⁰ In the circumstances described by Mundy we might discern what the Saudi genealogical imagination was like prior to the *tafra*, or inpouring of wealth, engendered by the oil boom. In a society of new material abundance, aspirants to social status enter into the lineage game. This is what is novel about the modern Saudi genealogical story, which has unfolded

not among the landscaped cliffside terraces of an Arabian pastoral, but behind the high and bare concrete walls of Riyadh's urban middle-class villas.

AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF ARABIA

Narrating a social and cultural history of modern Saudi Arabia that moves beyond the privileged framework of the kingdom's religious culture—as was Hamad al-Jāsir's object and is the object of this book—demands that the historian serve double duty as an anthropologist. This is especially the case with modern Arabian genealogies, which are as much reflections of the kinship practices of Saudis as they are of the oral cultural backdrop against which these practices have been imagined and constructed. The study of kinship was anthropology's original project.²¹ In working to uncover the kinship patterns of non-Western societies, Adam Kuper has argued, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropologists believed themselves to be recovering traces of an essential humanity (chimerical, it seems) that was thought to have been trampled under the tow of industrialization.²² Kinship studies took a battering among subsequent generations of anthropologists, for its close association with the colonial projects of Western empires²³ or for its biologizing of socially constructed facts,²⁴ and has still to recover its former luster. Still, in a society such as Saudi Arabia's, where over the past half-century kinship claims have come to be among the predominant cultural coins of the realm, the utility of the kinship paradigm for making sense of the kingdom's modern history should be apparent.

My study of how Saudi lineages have been represented over the past three centuries is informed throughout by anthropological theories of the constructed nature of kinship relations. Yet merely affirming one's allegiance to such an approach is not particularly meaningful; more interesting and pertinent is to detail how and by whom kinship relations are constructed and represented, and toward what ends. While I move with the weathered consensus that rejects classical conceptions of kinship structures as biologically determined units generative wholly of themselves or in close combination with one another, I am uneasy with the dominant postcolonial argument, that kinship networks are largely the invention of modern states. It is between the social and political imagination that modern kinship identity is formed, and though these two ways of conceiving kin relations might be deeply interwoven and difficult to separate from one another, they are not coterminous. Despite the ever-increasing reach of the Saudi state, I argue, how Saudis construct their kin relations is still conditioned strongly by the legacies of central Arabia's ecology and oral tradition.

The most important contribution of an anthropological approach is that it grounds us in a synchronic view of Arabian genealogies, which in turn helps

restore a measure of equivalency between Arabia's oral and textual traditions. Placing these traditions on an equal footing affirms the importance of the paradigm of orality against claims that it is misguided or obsolete,²⁵ and serves as a rejoinder to the caveats of reform- or piety-minded Saudis, who see the demise of tribalism—and the challenges it poses to a secular or Wahhabi-inflected modernity—as being just around the corner. A synchronic view, moreover, reminds us of the continuing power, despite its apparent absence, of oral tradition in the modern kingdom. Removing this tradition from the frame of analysis, as too often occurs, radically changes the picture of Saudi history. The preponderance of scholarship on modern Saudi Arabia, driven largely by corporate and security service interests or the opposition to them, tends to overemphasize the religious and economic narratives that predominate in the kingdom's official culture, while dismissing as marginal those aspects of Saudi life whose vitality and centrality this book has set out to prove. In an Arabian environment dominated historically by a bedouin culture of oral preservation and transmission, I argue, conceptions of culture rooted in textuality—that is, modern Islamic conceptions—are inadequate for explaining the transformation of Saudi society over the course of the twentieth century. What's more, the disruption associated with the transition from oral to textual culture is a phenomenon with resonance far beyond Saudi Arabia, and is in fact a critical dimension of the transformation of Middle Eastern societies and politics in the twentieth century.

TRIBAL IDENTITY AND THE SAUDI STATE

This book is, finally, a study of identity formation in a developing society, and the complex role of the modern state in this process. In the premodern Gulf of coastal towns, oasis villages, and nomadic hinterland tribes, kinship networks played an important role in organizing social and political life. As the scope and reach of the modern Saudi state increased, the political power of the kinship unit was eroded, and kinship networks receded into the realm of symbolic expression. Yet in the process of normalizing the criteria for Saudi citizenship, I conclude, the idiom in which kinship was expressed—the tribal idiom—was appropriated by the state for the efficient ordering and sorting of its new subject-citizenry. Under the new Saudi order, tribal kinship was reified as an essential component of national belonging, creating a new inadequacy for those who could not credibly claim it.

In an illuminating article, Ceren Belge documents the history of resistance by Kurdish kinship groups to the atomizing policies of the early Turkish republic, whose strategies for dissolving Kurdish kinship solidarities and registering Kurds as deculturated citizens were undermined by the continuing potency of these solidarities and their capacity to weave through and under-

mine the state's program from within.²⁶ Belge's study is meant in part as a challenge to the idea prevalent in postcolonial literature that modern kinship networks and hierarchies were edifices built entirely by states,²⁷ their local constitution being a derivative outcome of far-off intra-bureaucratic debates or the managerial attributes of proconsuls. Considering the question of how modern kinship solidarities are constructed in Saudi Arabia is useful both for drawing out some of the dynamics of national identity formation in the kingdom, and for expanding the theoretical and empirical range of the debate over the politics of kinship more generally.

Despite nearly a century of policy prescription and experimentation, Saudi national identity remains deeply in flux. Some of this can be attributed to the lingering informality that continues to characterize Saudi political life. In the early days of the state, for example, national holidays such as Accession Day could be migrated down the calendar when a new king took power;²⁸ some sixty years later, holidays were still being declared at a moment's notice.²⁹ In part, it is the personalized and seemingly arbitrary exercise of power that obscures the process by which Saudi national identity has come into being. Yet the challenge in defining Saudi national identity, this book argues, has also to do with the relatively weak attraction of impersonal ties and the central place of ascriptive ones, genealogies, in the Saudi social imagination. Semantically, we might recall, "Saudi" refers to a lineage and not an ethnic, territorial, religious, or language group, the traditional root collectives out of which national identities have been constituted in the modern age. It is the distinctive nature of this building block of nationhood that the reader should consider as he or she progresses through this volume.

Rather than a republican citizenship collective endowed with rights and responsibilities, the Saudi state might be described cynically as a mechanism for distributing economic goods to its populace. As such, its will to intervene in the messy and potentially dangerous business of shaping citizen identities, in the way of the Turkish republic and many other modern states, has been relatively limited. The twofold needs of this state—to distribute goods and privileges on a mass scale and to efficiently police its burgeoning bedouin and sedentary populations—however, required that the criteria for citizenship, and the exclusion from its privileges, be standardized. The homogenizing of modern Saudi society was thus never in question—the choice lay in the criteria by which to proceed.

States cannot create societies wholesale. They can, however, make powerful use of the ethnographic knowledge they collect about their subjects and citizens. The Soviet Union, for example, used such knowledge to classify and sort the disparate ethno-national communities it had inherited from the Russian empire, so that they might be more neatly subordinated to a pan-Soviet nationalism and the transcendent socialist ideals it was meant to represent.³⁰

In the Saudi case, progress toward forging the ultimate citizen was anchored deeply not in a techno-futurist vision but in a retro-gazing ethic that brought together religious and genealogical loyalties in a tense embrace.

While traditional kinship networks were certainly weakened in the process of state formation, most studies of modern Saudi Arabia fail to consider the extent to which genealogy, the ordering principle of the kin group, became the essential organizing principle of Saudi citizen identity. By normalizing citizenship on the basis of genealogical criteria, making lineal authentication a core function of substate political actors, and promoting an ideology of kinship meant to legitimate Āl Saʿūd family rule, this book argues, the Saudi state quietly established the grounds for a new form of political order. Under this new order, the idea of kinship was repurposed, and modern Saudi identity was transformed in ways whose meaning is still unfolding.

DESCRIPTION OF CHAPTERS

Chapter one introduces readers to the twentieth-century history of Saudi Arabia through the biography of one of its most notable but least recognized figures, the historian and genealogist Ḥamad al-Jāsir. More than any other single person, al-Jāsir was responsible for shaping the modern genealogical culture of Saudi Arabia. I document al-Jāsir's life from his birth in 1909 in a central Arabian village to the beginnings of his genealogical project in the 1970s. I review al-Jāsir's sometimes tumultuous relationship with his patrons in the Wahhabi religious establishment, his contributions to the development of the Saudi press and public culture, his views on Arabia's bedouin populations and on the Arabic language, and, finally, his turn toward scholarship and the documenting of Saudi lineages in the last third of his life.

In chapter two I examine how and why central Arabian genealogies were documented from the eighteenth through the twentieth century. I show how Saudi bedouin and settled populations conceived of their kinship relations through their own eyes and through the eyes of Western travelers. I draw attention to the caste-like status hierarchies that existed in central Arabia before the modern period, hierarchies rooted in Arabian political culture, and how the emergence of these hierarchies onto the pages of modern Saudi history represents an important transition in the kingdom's social and cultural life. It was the documenting of lineages and their mass circulation in print, I conclude, that helped transform Saudi genealogies from reflexive components of social and political life into coveted objects of modern Saudi identity.

In the next three chapters, I look closely at Ḥamad al-Jāsir's genealogical project and how it reflects social contestation in the modern kingdom. Proceeding from the intersection of anthropology and social history, chapter

three follows the lives of Saudi lineage seekers as they weave in and out of al-Jāsir's letters and their own personal narratives and texts. I relate the story of one of al-Jāsir's lineage-seeking petitioners, whom I call Rāshid b. Ḥumayd.³¹ Rāshid's story calls attention to the intimate and personal concerns that propel the modern Saudi search for tribal lineages, the uneasy interplay between oral and textual forms of genealogical knowledge, and the state's sometimes heavy hand in policing the boundaries of public culture in the kingdom.

Chapter four looks closely at marital patterns in Arabian history and demonstrates how knowledge of these patterns became a central dimension of Saudi Arabia's modern genealogical culture. The chapter commences with a review of new historical evidence from the central Arabian oasis town of al-Ghāt, which reveals the way marital patterns preserve knowledge about pre-modern status hierarchies. I then turn to Ḥamad al-Jāsir's use of marital patterns as a tool of lineal authentication, a practice epitomized in his study of a historically maligned Arabian tribe, Bāhila. I describe how al-Jāsir made use of Arabian marital patterns as a form of ethnographic data that could serve as a basis for rehabilitating the reputation of historically maligned tribes and advancing a nativist ethical blueprint for modern Saudi society in which tribal and religious values could cohere harmoniously against perceived external threats.

Chapter five calls attention to the role played by perceptions of racial difference in Saudi narratives of tribal authenticity. I examine how the intense pressure to claim affiliation with historically recognized Arabian tribes plays out in the western Arabian oasis town of al-ʿUlā. In their continuous cohabitation and close-knit solidarity, the people of al-ʿUlā, I find, are (ironically) constituted more "tribally" than many bedouin-origin Saudis who assert nominal tribal identities across the kingdom's atomized spaces, and who influence the sedentary discourse concerning tribes. By focusing on the histories of two parallel though disparate claimants to lineal origination within the Ḥarb tribe, Ḥamad al-Jāsir's tribe and that of many of the families of al-ʿUlā, I demonstrate the dynamic and contingent nature of tribal identity in modern Saudi Arabia.

In the concluding chapter, I situate the compulsion to claim tribal belonging in a set of institutional policies and techniques adopted by the modern Saudi state over the course of the twentieth century. Viewed as a whole, these policies and techniques combine to produce a genealogical rule of governance that underpins political practice in the kingdom. The position of Ḥamad al-Jāsir has by this point in the narrative diminished, as we open up to a consideration of the broader political context in which his project and worldview were embedded. I demonstrate how the Saudi state's efforts to standardize citizen identities according to genealogical criteria, promote lineal au-

thentication as a core political function, and privilege kinship as a dominant symbol of Āl Saʿūd rule have made genealogy a pervasive aspect of social and political life in the modern kingdom.

Throughout this book, I make extensive use of letters and other documents preserved in Maktabat al-ʿArab, Ḥamad al-Jāsir’s private library in Riyadh. Most have been cataloged with index numbers, to which I refer in subsequent citations. The letters examined here are part of a near-complete set of al-Jāsir’s correspondence from December 1992 through September 2000. This set includes several thousand incoming and outgoing letters, many hundreds of which treat genealogical topics.³² A complete set of outgoing letters from 1972 and 1973 was also available to me, as were scattered examples of letters from the period 1974–1991.³³ The whereabouts of the vast majority of al-Jāsir’s correspondence from this important period remain unknown.

The recent quality of much of the narrative I present here, combined with the sensitivity of genealogies in the kingdom, has compelled me to make methodological choices that might displease scholars of a more purist disciplinary bent. Many of Ḥamad al-Jāsir’s genealogical correspondents, those who in their letters to the scholar shared the intimate details of their private lives, are alive and well in the kingdom. As it is not my object to expose them to scandal, but rather to extract from their personal histories common themes that help shed light on the kingdom’s genealogical culture, I have used pseudonyms and elected to disguise most details about their personal lives, as well as those of the other families and individuals whose genealogical stories are presented in this book.

One great advantage of studying the legacy of a recently deceased scholar such as Ḥamad al-Jāsir is the large number of biographies, articles, and oral histories that continue to emerge about his life and work. During my four stays in Saudi Arabia between 2009 and 2014, I had the good fortune of being able to interview a number of al-Jāsir’s family members, disciples, and contemporaries, both admirers and detractors. Because of al-Jāsir’s centrality to this story, I cite nearly all of his public and private writings for attribution, while removing from them information that implicates other relevant personalities as needed.³⁴

While the affirmation of tribal genealogies is a ubiquitous facet of the modern culture of Saudi Arabia, the discussion of their absence in certain families remains a taboo, one I have not seen it fruitful to transgress. In making claims about the kingdom’s genealogical culture or the tribal or non-tribal status of individuals and families within it, I have sought to adhere closely to the textual evidence I have accumulated. While acknowledging the power of the oral tradition in reproducing knowledge about Arabian genealogies, I have also sought to problematize this tradition by reflecting on the malleability of central Arabia’s oral heritage in the face of the ideological and

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Introduction

material pressures exerted by the Saudi state. I have therefore looked to minimize my reliance in this book on the genealogical parlor chatter of the modern kingdom, while acknowledging the important role of this informal discourse in shaping perceptions about lineal affiliations.

In a study that deals primarily with representations of kinship, I have remained cognizant of, if disheartened by, what these representations include and what they exclude. Women especially are all but absent from Saudi genealogical charts and books. In the kingdom's genealogical culture, it is the ideology of patrilineage that predominates, such that the rich and significant world of matrilineal politics, and of the female genealogical imagination, is almost invariably obscured. I have been left therefore to draw inferences and make passing observations about the position of women within the kingdom's genealogical matrix, an outcome that, though inadequate, must for the moment suffice.